



## **Going Beyond the Bounds of Possibility: Questioning the Delimitation of the Social in Social Work**

*Rudi Roose, Filip Coussée and Lieve Bradt, Ghent University, Department of Social Welfare Studies*

### **1 Introduction**

In the late twentieth century, neo-liberal ideologies have put great pressure on European welfare states and on social work that seemed to be forced into a role of managing social exclusion (Scherr, 1999). All European countries, albeit in varying ways, held on to the project of the welfare state through pursuing the transformation of a passive welfare state into an active welfare state. This reframing of the welfare state re-emphasises the moral and pedagogical role of social work (Lorenz, 2001). This evolution revalues the perennial pedagogical tension between emancipation and control as the core of social work. Many social workers, however, feel they lack space to cope with the inherent tensions and paradoxes resulting from this dilemma. They deal with it in very different ways. Some social workers put their hopes in an emerging belief that social work practice could be based more fundamentally on 'evidence'. Others emphasise the need for integrated services and seamless provisions, while still others strive to establish social work as a more recognised profession. All these tendencies imply ambiguity as, on the one hand, potentially the boundaries of social work are broadened out and, on the other hand, new restrictions on social worker's room to move (McDonald and Marston, 2006) are created. The repedagogisation of social work seems to go hand in hand with an individualisation (or desocialisation) of social work practices and theories. The paradoxical nature of discussions all too often leads to sterile debates between believers and non-believers. For this thematic issue we asked some authors to go beyond these yes-no debates and to tap new sources of inspiration by exploring the key question: what is actually the significance of the social in social work?

### **2 Peeing in the corners: is there a need to define a territory for social work?**

Piessens (2008) states that social work theory and practice are developed through four guiding questions: (1) what is the role of social work in society, (2) how does social work position itself on the balance between emancipation and control, (3) how can social work match with the needs of clients, and (4) what is professional social work? Piessens (2008) argues that some of these questions are currently underexposed as social work mainly addresses the latter two questions by focusing on the accessibility of provisions and by searching for a better (methodological) answer to the problems it is confronted with. Notwithstanding their relevance to social work practice, a one-sided focus on the questions of accessibility and the development of adequate methods to solve social problems might enclose social work in an introspective debate. Such a self-referential approach reinforces the idea that social work is an answer to social problems, as if these problems have a natural character and exist apart from social work interventions. This problem-solving approach might be a very optimistic view in which the emancipatory power and the professional expertise of social work is stressed. At the same time, however, it renders social work extremely vulnerable to the blame that it does

not live up to its promises. As a consequence, it runs the risk to be gradually dominated by a managerial agenda that quickly becomes a disciplinary ‘what works?’ agenda (Masschelein & Simons, 2003). This instrumental and technocratic approach has the apparent advantage that the domain of social work and the effects and outcomes of social work interventions are fixed (Cruikshank, 1993; Baistow, 1994). Nevertheless, many questions have been raised about the role of the ‘what works’ approach: ‘The focus on what works makes it difficult if not impossible to ask the questions of what it should work *for* and who should have a say in determining the latter’ (Biesta, 2007: 5). In a ‘what works’ approach, social work practices tend to restrict their focus on the demarcation of their specific tasks and responsibilities. This tendency obscures the fact that every practice incorporates a certain definition of a situation into a specific problem. To give just one example: the current eagerness to increase parental support as an answer to poverty might suggest the idea that poverty is due to a lack of parental competencies (George, 2010). Without a doubt, the development of methods and actions in social work is of vital importance, as is the discussion on the professional status of the social worker, but if social work gets stuck in this introspective debate it loses the grip on its inherent political nature.

### **3 Certain but powerless, uncertain but powerful?**

Healy (2000) observes that theories have obtained a status of objective and unquestionable truths in the eyes of social workers. According to Lorenz (2007), the victory of a particular way of thinking that eliminates opposition, however, corresponds precisely to the point where many practising social workers experience a sense of powerlessness. They find themselves enclosed in predefined structures and definitions, which exactly induces the feeling that there is no space to cope with the pedagogical and political dilemma’s in social work. These dilemmas are inherent to social work, as this is exactly the meaning of the ‘social’ in social work. Social work has always functioned as a mediator between individual and social responsibility (Donzelot, 1977). Although the nature of this mediation might change, it is important to keep in mind that social work always, implicitly or explicitly, expresses a desired relation between individual aspirations on the one hand and collective expectations, imposed by institutions, state, communities, ... on the other hand. It is therefore clear that social work cannot be a-pedagogical, nor a-political. It can only pretend to be a neutral method. Cast as neutral procedural matters, within managerial mechanisms ‘the social’ in social work is translated instrumentally. The relation between individual life worlds and collective life has changed drastically during the last decades. People are incited to take more individual responsibility and an instrumental attitude towards social integration. In this instrumental approach, the professional expertise of social work does not include broader social questions, but mainly focuses on the question ‘how should we adapt to these changes?’. But which kind of citizenship does social work propagate then? The instrumental approach might offer a methodical certainty and a clearly defined professional knowledge base, but it can also induce frustrations, uncertainty and feelings of powerlessness. The ‘social’ in social work tends to erode and disappear (Lorenz, 2005) and is regarded as a consequence of a correct (evidence-based) solution to individual problems. As a consequence we witness an increasing dualism between those who have a way with individual competition and those who cannot cope due to a lack of resources (time, money, capacities, ...). Some authors argue that social workers should therefore go further down the line and invest much more in supporting people to acquire the individual life skills needed to find their place in a competitive market-society (Ferguson, 2001). Garrett (2003) firmly rejects this approach as it places too much emphasis on human agency and too little on structural constraints. According to him, ‘emancipatory politics’ should be social work’s primary orientation. In that line Jordan (2004) argues that

social workers do not have to adapt to the changes in the relationship between individual life worlds and collective expectations. In fact, social work should be one of the main actors shaping this relationship. This puts social work in a much more ambivalent position, situating social work's expertise in the social, in the search for a temporary, but feasible balance between individual aspirations, mutuality and democratic solidarity (Jordan, 2004).

#### **4 Re-socialising social problems**

Emphasising the social dimension in social work brings social workers in an often ambivalent and uncertain position balancing rights and obligations, interests of children and those of parents, objectives of labour market partners and those of children's health agencies, ... We argue that social workers (and their clients) are not powerless. For social work interventions are not only answers to social problems, but are closely connected to defining and constructing these problems. As a consequence social work interventions themselves help to create the individual and societal horizon of legitimate aspirations (Mahon 2002) and define the bounds of what is possible. In many countries social work is a public-private cooperation and a mixed ensemble of different organisations and institutions. This gives the opportunity to create a broad social forum for discussion and for disagreement, to raise counter-arguments (Mouffe, 2005) and to break open the boundaries of social work and the often introspective social work debates. However the emphasis on decentralisation and local governmental responsibilities, together with an emphasis on joined-up thinking and 'seamless provision', seem to feed a rather controlling attitude towards marginalised people, more concerned with papering over the cracks, than with re-constructing the foundations (Warin, 2007). The inherent political character of social work is then hidden again behind divided responsibilities. The use of enormously varying 'integrative concepts', such as children's rights, social pedagogy, prevention, healthy development, ... potentially challenge boundaries between different social work provisions. Nevertheless, at the same time these concepts are increasingly regarded as a method in itself to cover up that social work again fails to unveil and discuss the role of social work in the construction of society as a product of series of practices attempting to establish order in a context of contingency (Ruitenbergh, 2008).

#### **5 Challenging the boundaries**

In this issue of *Social Work and Society*, we gather five contributions focusing on different 'integrative concepts': evidence based practice (Northdurfer and Lorenz), children's rights (Reynaert, De Bie and Vandeveld), service user knowledge (Beresford), life world orientation (Van Ewijk) and social pedagogy (Lorenz, Coussée and Verschelden). Although these articles deal with very different topics, they all share in varying ways, a focus on the necessity of resocialising social work. Northdurfer and Lorenz look beyond the traditional discussion on pros and cons of evidence-based practice. Beresford adds to this discussion and brings in the importance of service user knowledge. In doing so, he counters the traditional view on what an expert is. Reynaert, De Bie and Vandeveld question the traditional 'expertocratic' approach to children's rights education as a debate on implementation. Van Ewijk argues for nearby social work rather than a technical profession. He introduces a broad umbrella perspective on social work which also contains social pedagogy. Lorenz, Coussée and Verschelden have a slightly different view on social pedagogy arguing for social pedagogy as historicized tool to critically enquire the role of social work in the mediation between individual aspirations and societal expectations. The contributions show how integrative concepts potentially challenge social work boundaries, connecting all social professions (including youth work, community work, welfare work, street work, arts and

cultural projects, ...) to each other, while at the same time raising new discussions and questions, and perhaps also creating new boundaries.

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**Author's Address:**

Rudi Roose  
Ghent University, Department of Social Welfare Studies  
H. Dunantlaan 2  
9000 Ghent  
Belgium  
Tel: ++32 9 2646281  
Fax: ++32 9 2646493  
Email: [rudi.roose@ugent.be](mailto:rudi.roose@ugent.be)

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